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ABSTRACT

Definitions and identification practices are examined in light of special problems facing gifted disabled and gifted disadvantaged students. Research is reviewed on a variety of gifted subgroups, including physical disabilities, diverse cultures and ethnic groups, underachievement, and learning disabilities. Differences in definitions of gifted and talented are pointed out. Problems with current identification approaches are noted, including their neglect of students from various gifted subgroups. The critical connections among definitions, identification, and programs are analyzed, and legal implications are cited. Alternative approaches, including interest-based identification and the use of enrichment activities as part of a screening process are described. It is concluded that the most promising solution for the gifted disadvantaged/disabled is increased emphasis on developing the potential of all students. (CL)

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A Rationale for Reexamining Definition, Identification, and Programs for the Gifted-Disabled/Disadvantaged

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A Rationale for Reexamining Definition, Identification, and Programs for the Gifted-Disabled/Disadvantaged

Introduction

In a recent article entitled Education of the gifted and talented in the world community, Mitchell and Williams (1987) conducted a survey of UNESCO nations and of the non-member nations of South Africa, Taiwan, and Zimbabwe. They supplemented the information from the 85 returned questionnaires with extensive reading. From this, they made several generalizations:

> First, virtually all nations--developed or developing, communist or capitalist--are philosophically committed to an egalitarian society....In most such nations, policy-making decisions are influenced by the fear that education for the gifted and talented may be just another form of elitism and privilege. Despite this fear, most nations see the necessity of nurturing their best minds and talents. National progress--in some cases, even national survival --is strongly linked to identifying gifted and talented young people and providing special educational programs for them....Most nations seem to be making creative efforts to provide programs for the gifted and talented that will further, rather than undermine, an egalitarian society (p. 534).

An unusual solution to this dilemma has been the designing of special educational programs for those gifted students who are also disadvantaged. Australia is currently addressing the needs of its aboriginal population. India, Pakistan, the Philippines, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China are developing special programs for those who live outside the cities, in the rural areas or the hinterlands. The article also refers to a fledgling organization in the United States for the disadvantaged

gifted (p. 534).

Such organizations in our country, however, are the exception rather than the rule. It is true that many programs for the gifted and talented have sprung up in recent years. It is also true that many students are not being accepted into such programs because they do not fit the stereotypic image of the gifted student. This paper will define the problems of some of these students. It will explore the many definitions of giftedness, investigate how students are or should be identified for admission into programs, and observe the relationships between definition, identification, and programs for the gifted and talented.

Survey of Subgroups

Research has begun in the area of physically handicapped students who may also be gifted. Gamble (1985) states that educators are identifying hearing-impaired students who are gifted and providing programs for them. Only 15% of the gifted hearing-impaired students in the survey were provided with special programs. However:

> The fairly recent establishment of at least 16 gifted programs for and accessible to hearing-impaired school-age individuals illustrates that the reluctance to provide programs for this subpopulation is apparently giving way to the acceptance of the fact that hearing impairment does not necessarily limit cognitive potential (p. 513).

Other surveys indicate that certain racial and ethnic groups as well as those who are handicapped by social conditions are not being proportionately represented in existing gifted/

talented programs. McKenzie (1986) surveyed all school districts in New Jersey other than special education and vocational schools. He discovered:

> While Asians represent only 3.55% of the total gifted population (18,584), their incidence of G/T participation (Asians in G/T program/Total Asian population) is 10.11%. Whites had the second highest incidence of participation (6.85%) followed by native Americans (3.85%), blacks (2.42%), and hispanics (1.87%). These differences were statistically significant (chi square=5148, 4df). The percentages of the total G/T population for whites, native Americans, blacks and hispanics were 72.64%, .06%, 17.25% and 6.50% respectively (pp. 93-94).

Johnson, Starnes, Gregory, and Blaylock (1985) undertook a project to identify "potentially gifted students among culturally and socioeconomically diverse populations" (p. 418). They found that the students being overlooked fell into two distinct groups:

> The first group was made up of those students who currently have the abilities of gifted and talented students. They could be successful in existing programs, but they often are being overlooked during the process of identification and selection. The second group was made up of children with potential who have been prevented from refining and extending their skills because of various barriers to their development such as poverty, lack of early enrichment experiences, developmental delays, or differences in language and/or culture (p. 417).

There are other children who show a marked disparity between their indicated potential and actual achievement. These children are the so-called underachievers. Rimm (1985) points out that gifted children are vulnerable to underachievement. Often these children enjoy a close relationship with one or more interested adults which "although supportive to verbal and intellectual

growth, carries with it the risk of causing the child to be too dependent on positive feedback, or at the other extreme, too independent or controlling" (p. 5). This association which begins during the preschool years can cause these children to become "attention addicted" which may cause stress in classroom conditions.

Their underachievement pattern can manifest itself at Grade 3, Grade 5, at the beginning of middle school, in senior high school, or in college, when these children reach stages at which they are competitively challenged.

> Children manifest their underachievement either by withdrawing from achieving practices and increasing avoidance behaviors or by a more aggressive rebellion against the academic establishment and the family. Both alternatives result in a downward achievement cycle which results in lack of confidence, skills, and accomplishment (p. 5).

Finally, there are those children who are at once gifted and learning disabled.

At this point, it becomes both a necessary and a difficult task to define exactly what is meant by "learning disabilities". Berk (1983) analyzed the definitions of this term over the past twenty years and discovered four elements included in most definitions, "1. Normal intelligence...2. Ability-achievement discrepancy (underachievement)...2. Academic disorder...[and] 4. Psychological process disorder" (pp. 58-59). He also delineated from these definitions what they did not include:

> Elements of exclusion delineate the characteristics of children that exclude them from being identified as learning disabled....They designate what a learning disabled child is not. The exclusion clause specifies, in essence, that if a child is not deaf, blind, emotionally disturbed, mentally retarded, or disadvantaged, yet exhibits learning problems, he or she must have a learning disability (pp. 60-61).

In a historical perspective Senf (1983) points out that PL 94-142 defined a learning disability as "the discrepancy between intelligence and one or more of the areas of reading, writing, spelling, mathematical computation, written expression, oral expression, and comprehension" (p. 39). Using this definition it would seem that learning-disabled children could be identified simply by comparing intelligence test scores with the discrepancies in the abovementioned school skills. But Senf maintains that these children are characterized by personality and behavioral disturbances. This is not simply a matter of cause and effect or even of primary and secondary characteristics.

> It seems reasonable, however, to assert the likelihood that underlying learning disabilities are not simply the cause of school-skill problems, which in turn negatively impact the child's personality and behavioral outcomes; rather, the learning disability itself has a pervasive impact on the total child. The same disability which affects a school skill also affects information processing in the social and emotional realm. This general disruption is not the result of the school-skill problem but an integral part of the total symptomatology (p. 43).

Rosner and Seymour (1983) contend that teachers "have been unable to conceptualize the existence" of an individual who is at once gifted and learning-disabled. The presence of these two

syndromes simultaneously often leads to a behavioral presentation in which neither giftedness nor learning disability is apparent. (p. 77).

According to Tannenbaum and Baldwin (1983), society looks upon the gifted and the learning-disabled as two separate and contradictory subgroups "entirely incompatible and irrenconcilable" within the same student. Educators are often so absorbed with the child's failures and their efforts at remediation, that they fail to recognize that spark of giftedness which is also present (pp. 11-12). Furthermore, Fox, Brody and Tobin (1983) suggest the possibility of a "staggering" number of pupils whose gifts and disabilities are not readily apparent, who are performing at or below grade level and whose disabilities belie their true potential (p. 4).

Definitions of Giftedness

Tannenbaum and Baldwin (1983) have observed that "Giftedness in children means different things to different people" (p. 11). Research has found this to be true on both a global and a national level. Busse, Dahme, Wagner, and Wieczerkowski (1986) developed a cross-cultural study wherein 434 West German and 446 American high school teachers nominated one of their students as highly gifted and proceeded to rate that student on 83 different characteristics. When the intercorrelations of these items were then factor analyzed, some interesting differences between the

two nations emerged:

> [In] the American factor pattern...there was an intelligent factor, another labeled creative, and a third called achievement-oriented....the West German teachers perceived the intellectual characteristics of highly gifted German students along two dimensions, logical problem solving and verbally proficient....The German sample also yielded an artistic factor which was somewhat different from the American creative factor (p. 913).

Furthermore, the Americans rated intelligence as the greatest factor by far; the Germans ranked it fifth and sixth (p. 914).

A final difference to be mentioned is the way the two nations perceived highly gifted mathematics students. The Americans, but not the Germans, found mathematical achievement closely related to attainments in language, both native and foreign (p. 914).

Even here in the United States, the term "mathematically gifted" also means different things to different people, as Chang (1984) has observed:

> The term "mathematically gifted" at times is loosely applied to three groups of students: a) those who learn standard content well and perform accurately, but who have difficulty when taught at a faster pace or at a deeper conceptual level; b) those who can learn more content and a deeper level, who reason well and are capable of solving more complex problems than average students; and c) those who are highly talented or precocious, capable of performing with little or no formal instruction at the level of students several years older, and of dealing expertly with sophisticated content and difficult problems (p. 232).

Although the terms "gifted" and "talented" are used interchangeably by most researchers, Gagne (1985) makes this distinction:

> Giftedness corresponds to competence which is distinctly above average in one or more domains of ability. Talent refers to performance which is distinctly above average in

> one or more fields of human performance....This distinction implies, as a corollary, that every talented individual is necessarily gifted, although the inverse is not true; a gifted individual is not necessarily talented. Since it is a manifestation of giftedness in a particular field of activity, talent necessarily implies the presence of underlying abilities capable of explaining it (p. 108).

Gagne applies his definition to the underachieving student:

> However, it can certainly happen...that an individual shows himself to be gifted, that is the possessor of exceptional abilities, without having manifested his giftedness in any academic talent....Our model allows us, in fact, to define these people as gifted intellectually, but not talented academically (p. 108).

Fox and Brody (1983) attempt to place the learning-disabled/gifted child within some models of giftedness. Their statement closely parallels that of Gagne:

> A definition that emphasizes a child's potential rather than achievement would be more likely to include the learning-disabled/gifted child who has high potential but whose disability was limiting school performance (pp. 104-105).

They are also concerned about how broadly the term "giftedness" is defined:

> Such children would not be considered gifted if high levels of achievement or aptitude are required in all intellectual/academic areas because the learning-disabled child would have deficits in one or more areas. If precocity in only one area is necessary to be considered gifted, the learning-disabled child may exhibit precocity in an area untouched by the disability (p. 104).

Finally, in a statement that closely parallels that one used at the beginning of this section, they state, "Clearly, the concept of learning-disabled/gifted children is viable according to some definitions but not to others" (p. 104).

Identification

In the article Identification of gifted students: An update, Richert (1985) cites the definition of giftedness legislated by the U.S. Office of Education in 1972. According to this definition, the following groups of students are included:

> Children with "demonstrated" and/or "potential" high performance in the following areas: (a) general intellectual ability; (b) specific academic aptitude; (c) creative or productive thinking; (d) leadership ability; and (e) psychomotor ability (p. 68).

However, using local standards, many gifted students will be screened out by the identification process:

> While most states formally subscribe to the comprehensive federal definition, in practice local districts tend to seek and to find white, middle-class academic achievers. Moreover, despite a great deal of evidence that academic performance is not highly predictive of adult giftedness, most identification procedures are limited to measures of academic achievement: (a) achievement tests, (b) IQ tests (many of whose subtests are admittedly achievement tests), (c) grades, and (d) teacher recommendations (which do not differ markedly from grades given by those same teachers) (p. 70).

Richert further maintains that using these procedures, the following groups are often overlooked:

> (a) Underachieving, poor and minority gifted children who most need programs to develop their potential; (b) the creative and/or divergent thinkers whose abilities are not tested by standardized intelligence on achievement tests or grades; and (c) other groups including the learning disabled or handicapped gifted (p. 70).

Kaufman and Harrison (1986) favor the use of intelligence

tests when used intelligently. According to them, these tests should be used for program planning as well as classification, the standard error of measurement of scores must be taken into account, cut-off scores should be used for inclusion rather than exclusion from programs, and intelligence test scores should not be viewed as the only criterion for placement in programs, nor should they be used to label children (pp. 158-159).

Tannenbaum and Baldwin (1983) point out that no matter how liberal the criteria for identification, a child with learning disabilities will find it difficult to be identified. "The symptoms of this handicap are so distracting that they divert attention from any signs of giftedness" (p. 11).

Many researchers believe that the identification process must take into consideration the potential of children as well as their achievements in order to admit underachieving children, especially the learning-disabled/gifted. Tannenbaum and Baldwin (1983) have observed:

> The learning-disabled child...rarely exhibits any of the learning and behavioral characteristics that schools look for in gifted students. To the contrary, in order to "qualify" as learning disabled, there must be a considerable discrepancy between the child's potential and actual work performance, a factor which is rarely perceived as compatible with giftedness (p. 20).

Fox and Brody (1983) suggest that, in the case of these children, over-inclusion is preferable to under-inclusion:

> Give them [learning-disabled/gifted students] the opportunities for special or individualized educational programs rather than err by possibly overlooking many talented students with high potential who are not achieving because of their disabilities (p. 113).

One test has been found to measure the gifted underachiever. Mather and Udall (1985) performed a study using the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery. This battery includes both cognitive or intelligence subtests and achievement subtests. There are both aptitude and achievement tests in the areas of reading, mathematics, written language, and knowledge. The Achievement-Aptitude Profile compares these tests and the calculated discrepancy is classified by levels ranging from Very Superior to Severe Deficit (p. 54). The advantages of the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery according to Mather and Udall, are that the norms were established using the same subjects, one person can administer both parts of the test and the parts can be compared to indicate the discrepancy between expected and actual achievement (pp. 54-55). Results of Mather and Udall's study indicate that this battery "can be useful" in identifying the gifted underachiever and "may prove to be a valuable diagnostic tool...for the identification of both gifted students and underachieving gifted students" (p. 56).

Relationship Between Definition, Identification, and Programs

Theoretically, at least, it seems a simple matter to inaugurate a program for gifted and talented students. Find a "universal"

definition of giftedness, develop precise measures of identifying those qualities stated in the definition, and develop programs for the students selected. In reality, however, this appears not to be the case. There are multiple definitions of giftedness, only some of which have been alluded to in this paper. There are countless identification techniques, many of which have been decried as imprecise, and most of which seem to have both champions and critics. Finally, it is seen that despite the definition or identification practice in use, there are populations of students who, by reason of disability or disadvantage, are being excluded from programs for the gifted. Where does the "fault" lie? Can research suggest any program that, while not entirely alleviating the situation, at least will extend the opportunities for many of these students to participate in programs wherein they are sufficiently challenged?

"A serious problem with the identification process is often a general, indiscriminate use of tests to identify the all-purpose gifted student, regardless of the nature of the program offerings", according to Feldhusen, Asher, and Hoover (1985) (p. 150). They insist that instead of using the information gleaned from these tests to diagnostically determine strengths and needs, gifted students are assumed to be "a homogeneous group who can all profit equally from a common curriculum" (p. 150).

Sosniak (1987) observes:

> Merely labeling a child "academically talented" does not provide sufficient information from which to develop a program suited to that child's unique abilities and needs....such programs should be directly linked to the special gifts or talents of the participants" (p. 538).

Sosniak's implications go one step further:

> If educational programs for the gifted and talented do not successfully develop the special gifts and talents of participants, we must reconsider the content of those educational programs, the methods we use to identify gifted and talented students, and even our basic notions of what "gifted and talented" means (p. 538).

So unless definition, identification, and programs are connected in a very real manner, not just in theory, at least one of those items needs to be changed; not only for the sake of the participants in the programs, but for the potential applicants as well. Tannenbaum and Baldwin (1983), in speaking of the learning-disabled/gifted student, restate this relationship:

> The more talents that are sought, the more expanded educational activities have to be relied upon to help in the identification process. Thus, enrichment is a vehicle for identification as much as identification is a facilitator of enrichment. This relationship has an oscillating nature in the sense that it is reciprocal and mutually reinforcing. The need for such oscillation (and less vacillation) is especially obvious for learning-disabled/gifted children whose handicaps usually limit their exposure to enrichment in favor of remediation (p. 24).

This idea is further explored by McKenzie (1986) who was mentioned earlier in this paper in connection with a survey of school districts in New Jersey and the discovery of a disproportion of different racial/ethnic groups in gifted/talented programs.

> A....major concern raised by the data in this study is the tendency for districts to operationalize definitions of giftedness which work to the advantage of the already advantaged. These definitions lead to identification procedures which spotlight those children whose gifts are most readily apparent. These procedures in turn skew the provision of services to those who already demonstrate ability, often on tasks which are easier for those with socially and economically advantaged backgrounds. As a result of this approach to giftedness, the inequities flowing from inequalities between communities are further exaggerated. Minorities and the disadvantaged have far less chance of participation in G/T programs than do advantaged members of the majority culture. Those with a headstart in the race are effectively separated from those who were handicapped by reason of social conditions (p. 94).

McKenzie then proceeds toward a reexamination of the definition:

> We must turn to a definition of giftedness which will stress the importance of development. Gifted programs should be viewed as an investment in human potential, and identification procedures should be based upon a broadened and more flexible conception of giftedness which places greater emphasis upon the discovery, development and nurturing of hitherto undiscovered gifts (pp. 94-95).

Johnson, Starnes, Gregory, and Blaylock (1985) who initiated procedures and techniques "for the purpose of identifying potentially gifted students among culturally and socioeconomically diverse populations" (p. 418), also developed an instructional program to aid students in making the transition from potentially gifted to acknowledged gifted in the gifted and talented program. Although the program was designed to fit the potentially gifted students into the already existing gifted/talented program rather than have the program "redefined" to accomodate the potentially gifted minority students, preliminary data show that these students grew in the areas of self-concept skills, and a "significant

proportion" of these students were accepted into the gifted/ talented program although they had not previously been identified as gifted. They conclude, "Both the battery and the instructional program were needed to assist these students in maximizing their potential....[Further] exploration should focus on both identifying and nurturing such children" (p. 430).

Considering the research already quoted, and the success of the identification battery and instructional program, I believe that the established criteria for the regular gifted and talented program could and should be redefined to include these minority students.

Unified Models of Definition, Identification, and Programs

Shaw (1986) argues that when assessing the degree of superiority prior to placement in a specialized program, the student must be compared to the others to whom the program is being offered. If there are two distinctly different cultural groups within the same school district, for example, the use of tests which compare the student to the national norm could contain a testing bias in favor of the wealthier white middle-class population. This would place the minority culture, quite literally, at a disadvantage (p. 47).

Shaw further states, "Failure to make certain of a strong and rational connection between the characteristics used in defining giftedness, the means of identification and the program content can lead to disastrously arbitrary programs" (p. 47). He maintains that children will be included or excluded from the

group of those considered "gifted" depending upon which characteristics are included in the selected definition. Unless these characteristics are connected to program content, the choice of the criteria appears to be arbitrary (p. 45). For example, if academic achievement in mathematics were a qualification, and a student were identified as possessing this characteristic, the child should be rationally be placed in a mathematics program for the gifted; there is no rational basis for placing him or her in a literature program for the gifted.

Shaw suggests that the connection between definition, identification, and programs has legal implications. "Educational programs are unconstitutional as being unreasonably discriminatory if they differentiate between groups of children without any reasonable basis bearing on the purposes sought to be accomplished by the programs" (p. 44). Moreover:

> "Giftedness" is not a single quality or standardized group of qualities for which a single educational regimen is appropriate. Attempts to lump all gifted children into a single group receiving the same content is ultimately wasteful as the children with gifts that do not match the content occupy space despite the inappropriateness of the content and sometimes despite their lack of interest and productivity as well (p. 54).

Shaw solves these dilemmas through a program which he labels "interest-based identification". In this process, a group of children experiences a series of progressively more difficult lessons within a specified content area. The children themselves

select their own ability, interest, and motivation. At each level, the students interested in pursuing the subject matter further become involved in the next higher level until only a few students remain to pursue the study at a "gifted" level. Thereafter, these students return to the original group, and the process is repeated again using a different content or area. Shaw stresses the importance of providing all children with interest and motivation in the subject area during the identification process (p. 55). The characteristics used in the identification process therefore, are interest and motivation, and the means used in identification are the needs of the children as determined by the children themselves, and reported by them to the teacher (p. 57). He concludes:

> Furthermore, this identification design widely exposes children of widely different racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds to content ultimately suited for gifted children. The biases against racial and cultural minorities as well as those children coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and women, which are inherent in the use of standardized tests, are, for the most part, avoided. Gifted programs ought to focus upon giving the widest range of children possible the opportunity to succeed in curricula suitable for the gifted (pp. 57-58).

Enrichment activities seem to be a viable alternative, not only for the disadvantaged, but also for the learning-disabled as well. Tannenbaum and Baldwin (1983) suggest, "Learning-disabled children who seem to possess special talents at the Screening stage should have opportunities to demonstrate their

potential for excellence through enriched classroom experiences" (p. 32).

Of course, Shaw's model is not the only solution. Richert (1985) suggests that since gifted students are different from each other, as well as from other students, many program options should be considered:

> The key is to assess and modify resources appropriately and to provide practical staff development so that a variety of program options are available to all students who are potentially gifted rather than the 2 to 5% of students districts traditionally serve (p. 72).

Finally, Fox, Brody, and Tobin (1983) state in the conclusion of their book:

> Until the educational system capitalizes upon the unique strengths of each child instead of penalizing them for their inability to conform to some standard of normal development, society is likely to suffer from the loss of talents not developed among many children (p. 280).

Conclusions and Recommendations

We have examined definitions and identification practices as they relate to the gifted. We have seen the difficulties as well as the earnest efforts of those who are concerned with the learning disabled and disadvantaged students who are also gifted, and their efforts to include them into gifted programs. We have examined some solutions. More importantly, we have discovered the vital connection that must exist between definition, identification, and programs.

If I were to express this connection as a visual model,

it would be that of an equilateral triangle, in which definition, identification, and programs, would represent the three angles, which would be connected to each other. Students could enter the triangle at any of the angles. The traditional idea has been that they enter at the "definition angle", are then identified and programs provided for them.

However, they can also be admitted at the "identification angle". They can be identified as gifted, programs provided for them, and the existing definitions of giftedness redefined to include them. Johnson, Starnes, Gregory and Blaylock (1985) identified gifted minority students through a battery of procedures and techniques, and implemented an instructional program for these students. I believe that the regular gifted program at this point should have redefined their concept of giftedness to include these minority children.

Students can also enter at the "program angle". An example of this was seen in Shaw's interest-based identification program. Other examples can be found in various types of enrichment programs. Here activities are presented to challenge all students, including the "average" student, the traditionally-acknowledged gifted, and the gifted with learning disabilities or disadvantages. The emphasis is on developing the potential of all students. I believe that this is the most promising solution for the gifted-disabled/disadvantaged.

Such programs, admittedly are difficult to evaluate, especially for purposes of research. It would be tempting to plan an experiment to compare the progress of these children with the traditionally gifted students or with a control group of non-gifted students to measure the progress of each group. Such results would, however, be completely misleading. First, each of the groups of learning-disabled/disadvantaged students has its own special obstacles to overcome, so progress may not be predictable, or even noticeable, especially at first. Second, because this group constitutes such a wide variety of problems that must be addressed, it is difficult to affect a comparison within this group, not to mention comparisons as a group with the traditionally gifted or non-gifted students. Third, identifying the "non-gifted" becomes imprecise since many of them may have disabilities or disadvantages that have not yet become apparent to the educator or researcher. Finally, funding of these programs can be jeopardized, if officials in charge of appropriations interpret anything less than observable, tangible, documented progress, as a sign that the programs are not successful.

It is therefore essential that evaluations be based on qualitative rather than quantitative data. For example, the use of an individualized education plan (IEP), with which teachers of the learning disabled are already familiar, can be adapted to include all students in these programs as well.

I believe that we must have programs in every school that will concentrate on the strengths of its students. Whether or not these students are "officially" recognized as gifted, they must have the opportunity to be motivated, to be challenged, and to develop their potential to the utmost. Enrichment can not be viewed as a luxury. It is as vital a process as remediation.

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